

Christianity's Dirty Words
Sermon #3 – Obedience
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I heard the story once about a professor who was leading a seminar on Christian counseling. In a room full of Christians in the pastoral care field, he wrote this on a flipchart: "I can't do anything by myself. I can only do what my dad tells me to do." He then asked the folks in the room to analyze the man who said this.

The professor got the expected responses: "This person obviously has no willpower." "He needs to grow a spine and get a life." "I bet he still lives at home." "He needs to get out from under his dad's shadow and become his own person." Then the professor revealed the identity of the man: It was Jesus who said this in John 5:19: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does."

The responses to Jesus' words is typical for how today's society views the issues of independence and individuality. In our sermon series on "Christianity's Dirty Words," we've been looking at words from our vocabulary of faith that have been redefined in negative ways by the larger culture. Today we'll look at the word "obedience."

The first thing I think of when I hear that word is a dog obedience school, a place where we send a pet so they can learn to behave correctly and become socially acceptable. If that's the justification for sending our pets there, I think a case could be made for a human obedience school, where people are sent to learn to behave correctly and become socially acceptable. In fact, we all probably know some people for whom we'd gladly pay their tuition if they would enroll.

But we balk at the idea of this concept for one very simple, very human reason: we don't like anyone telling us what to do, and for us, obedience has come to mean "doing what someone tells us to do." And that goes against the very essence of what it means to be an American. Our country was founded specifically because someone tried to tell us what to do. I saw a sign from the Colonial era in an antique store once, and the sign read, "We will have no King to rule over us!" In England, we were used to having a king and calling someone "Your Lordship." When we got to America, when we got on our own turf, we bucked that oppressive trend. No one is going to tell us what to do!

That independent spirit didn't start in the Colonies. It started a little further back, with a couple of people named Adam and Eve. God blessed the first couple with this idyllic paradise called Eden. It was full of beautiful plants and wonderful animals and all kinds of food-bearing plants and trees. And God said to them there was only one condition: They could not eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Eat anything else you want, but don't eat from that tree. And Adam and Eve said, "You can't tell us what to do!"

From that point on, disobedience and rebellion have been woven into our DNA. Anyone who has a teenager can attest to this. When I was a teenager, my mom married my stepfather. Up to that point, because my mom had been a single parent, I had a lot of freedom about what I did, how late I stayed up, and things like that. My new stepfather was a Captain in the Army, and his approach to parenting was a little different. Structure. Order. Discipline. Chores.

From that point on, I went out of my way to disobey him, simply because I didn't like being told what to do. One of my chores was to walk our dog right after school each day. To monitor whether I did this or not, my stepfather would check the leash each day to see if it had been moved in the drawer. So when I got home from school, I would take the leash, shake it a few times, and then put it back. I didn't care that my poor dog was walking around with his legs crossed; I was determined to show my stepfather that he couldn't tell me what to do!

Webster's defines "obey" as "to comply with or be submissive to authority." There's a definition crying to be disliked. Submission? Authority? Those words are definite turn-offs in our culture that places value on individuality and nonconformity. "Obedience" has become a word that implies weakness, oppression, subservience. There's a reason that wedding vows no longer ask for the couple to love, honor and obey each other. Obedience is a bad thing.

That's why we bristle when the Bible talks about obedience. Scripture calls us to submit to the ultimate authority, but because it's out of fashion to do that in every other part of our lives, we have great difficulty doing so in our faith. If Adam and Eve, living in the Garden of Eden, can't even toe the line, how are we supposed to be obedient in this modern day and age that encourage us to "seize the day" and question authority?

What we need to do is to recapture what the Bible means by "obedience," especially in relationship to our faith. When you couple the word "obedience" with church, the first thing we probably think of are restrictions: no dancing, no drinking, no playing cards, no R-rated movies, no smiling, no having fun. Who wants to live a life filled with all those restrictions? So we rebel against what we perceive to be the tyrannical and joyless aspects of an obedient faith.

But a closer reading of Scripture shows us that the Bible doesn't define "obedience" as restriction, but as freedom. That may sound peculiar since we've been taught to believe that obeying means giving up your freedom. But obeying God actually gives us freedom. Freedom from something is in turn freedom for something else.

We think we can be independent from God, and that this independence brings us freedom. Actually, it's obedience that brings freedom, because it frees us up from trying to figure it all out ourselves. The opposite of obedience is selfishness. When we rebel against God, when we say to God, "You can't tell me what to do!" we leave ourselves to our own devices. We put our desires above anyone else's. We claim that we don't need God because we've got it all figured out. And when life is going well, it probably feels that way. But the reality of life is that we will always be someone's or something's servant. Bob Dylan sang, "You're gonna have to serve somebody. Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody."

God calls each of us to obedience, but not because we are being punished or because God wants to show us who's boss. Listen again to Deuteronomy: "Hear, O Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your fathers, promised you." In other words, when deciding whether to obey God or your own selfish desires, keep in mind which one of you has a better chance of knowing what's going on. Creation obeys the Creator, not the other way around. God gave the Israelites the law so that they would know what God wanted to them to do, and by doing so they would be blessed. Christ came as the fulfillment of the law, so by following Christ we honor God

and keep his commands, commands meant to give us life in abundance. John writes, “The world and its desires pass away, but the person who does the will of God lives forever.”

It may not always feel that way to us, which is why we need a redefinition and reminder. Remember “Karate Kid”? After getting beat up a few times, Daniel tells Mr. Miagi that he wants to learn karate. Miagi reluctantly agrees to teach Daniel-son, and has Daniel come to his house for the first lesson. Do you remember what that first lesson was? “Wax the cars.” Wax on, wax off. The next lesson? Daniel had to sand Miagi’s huge deck. Then paint his fence. Then paint the house! Daniel-son finally throws a fit and is ready to quit, because while he’s given Mr. Miagi’s property an extreme makeover, he hasn’t learn how to do one good karate chop.

Just as Daniel-son is about to throw down his brush and walk away, Mr. Miagi says, “Show me wax on, wax off.” As Daniel demonstrates these motions he’s learned while painting and waxing and sanding, Miagi shows him that he’s been learning to protect himself from an attack. Had he done it his way, Daniel probably would have learned how to kick and chop his way right into a knuckle sandwich. But through his and obedience of Mr. Miagi, Daniel has learned the crucial elements of self-preservation.

God does not call us to obey his commands to punish us. God is not trying to take the fun out of living. To the contrary, God is trying to make our lives joyful by unburdening us of the responsibility of getting it right by ourselves. When we submit ourselves to God, we free ourselves to live the life God has called us to live, which is infinitely better than anything we could dream up on our own. We have a king to rule over us. May his will, not ours, be done.